DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 090 614 CS 500 688

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TITLE Use of Preview Courses.
PUB DATE Feb 73
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Basic Course Director's Conference (West Lafayette, Ind., February, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *College Curriculum; *Course Descriptions; *Course Evaluation; Courses; *Curriculum Evaluation; *Educational Change; Faculty Evaluation; Higher Education; Publicize
IDENTIFIERS *Preview Courses

ABSTRACT

Pressure upon institutions of higher education to attract more students and to cut back on the number of courses offered has increased in recent years. A part of the problem is to determine which courses should continue to be offered and to better fit student interests to the course available. One solution to this problem, is the offering of "preview courses." A preview course, as practiced at Illinois State University and elsewhere, is a condensed, short course or series of class meetings during which the instructor presents the syllabus, textbooks, and approach to the subject matter. Students attending such sessions could sample the dimensions of existing courses before enrolling and thus would be more likely to be satisfied with the courses chosen. A college "preview course" program is a tangible demonstration of interest in students by college academic departments. (CH)

ED 090614

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USE OF PREVIEW COURSES

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Accepted for publication

in

Improving College & University Teaching

Presented at the

Basic Course Director's Conference
West Lafayette, Indiana

February 9, 1973

CS 500 688

In recent years, students have placed pressure on university faculties and administrators in order to have changes made in curriculum, particulary in the area of general education requirements. Students have sought and, in some cases, received greater freedom from taking a prescribed list of specified classes in general education sequences. Further, they have found greater flexibility within their own major discipline. Benezet reports in the Chronicle of Higher Education in November, 1972 that, "student interest in university decision-making comes down, in concrete terms, to a demand for change in what is being taught in the general undergraduate program." While he suggests that a number of students are cynical, he is not specific and only concludes that the number is growing. With this freedom, class selection by individual students has increased. Shopping for courses in different departments of the university is an option now open to students. With fewer required courses that insure enrollment and increasing demands in the student needs, departments must develop new means of advertising the classes which they have available.

Externally, the university has been faced by pressure from private citizens, as manifested through state legislatures and governing boards, to become more accountable in the expenditure of tax revenues. Many schools throughout the country have been forced to severely limit the funds they have available to develop new programs and/or continue currently existing programs. In fact, some states like Illinois and Oregon are required to reduce expenditures and make cuts in existing university programs. If universities choose not to renege on their responsibilities, they will choose some method other than simply cutting the cost of every program. Administrators, department chairmen, and curriculum committees will take a close look at the offerings in each program in

the university to determine which programs justify continuance, increasing of funds, or discontinuance as a viable program. Whether we as faculty like it or not, part of the rationale used in justification for courses and curriculum will be student demand and student evaluation.

We must first determine whether or not our courses and the program in which they are contained provide a meaningful learning experience for our students. When we have determined the viability of our courses and programs, we must then find ways to provide information that will assist the student in the selection of appropriate courses. The purpose of this paper, then, is to discuss two ways to determine the meaningfulness of our curriculum and to develop one way that we can assist our students in the class selection process.

One of the first and most obvious ways to operate under limited funds and limited faculty would be to revise our curriculum in each department. Over the years we have noticed a proliferation of courses in our various disciplines as new faculty have been added. In fact, every time a new faculty member has been appointed the chances are very good that a course will be instituted in that faculty member's specialty or area related to his dissertation. While this may gratify certain needs of individual faculty members, contribution of such courses for a student's curriculum can only be described as a serendipity effect of those courses. An example of the reversal of this trend can be seen in one department at West Virginia University where 54 courses offered in the curriculum were abolished and only 27 new ones were instituted as replacements. As budgets get tighter, more courses will have to be revised to make room for new programs.

A second approach to the problem of internal and external pressure on the curriculum is to abolish programs that no longer maintain their viability.

At Illinois State University a special Task Force on Institutional Priorities examined each and every degree program in the university in order to determine student demand, societal need, and related manpower considerations, to the goal of determining which programs would be recommended for continuance and which programs would be phased out or completely eliminated. It is not uncommon to read in the Chronicle of Higher Education that such procedures are being adopted across the country by more state Boards of Education and Boards of Regents of specific universities.

Both of these proposals suggest changes that can be instituted to ameliorate student and external pressure on our curriculum. The remainder of this paper will contain a description of the procedure that can be used once these changes have occurred.

At Illinois State University, the author introduced a program of class preview for all students in the university. The purpose of these preview sessions was to provide students with the knowledge of specific course content before they had to pre-enroll for their semester classes. Students were offered the opportunity to evaluate the content and the instructor before preregistration. Usually, the student has to rely on a small paragraph in the catalogue or the opinion of fellow students for information about respective classes. Although he may have course evaluation information from previous semesters, it is more likely in these cases that the course was taught by someone else or with a different format than that being proposed for the ensuing semester.

The individual preview sessions can vary in length from 30 to 60 minutes. Specifically, each session gives the student the opportunity to meet the instructor; observe the way he handles the class; receive the course

syllabus; find out what textbooks are going to be used; and discover what papers, tests, other assignments are involved in the course. This information is of little value, however, if students cannot expect to receive some guarantee that the preview course will contain the material exactly the way it is to be included in the actual course. It would lessen the value of the preview session if the instructor were to make drastic changes in assignments, textbooks, and related material.

To implement the preview course procedure, a preview class schedule is developed based upon the coming semester's class schedule. We set aside a one-week period to offer a preview program. After a list of available rooms was determined, we asked the faculty in the department to select half-hour blocks to list their preview course at least once during that period. The program was, however, voluntary for the faculty. With the more popular and multi-section courses, we asked the faculty to sign up for several sessions and at different hours to allow greater course visibility for students. We then made this schedule available to students as a handout and also had it printed in the campus newspaper.

Publicity of the preview schedule is a key to the effectiveness of its operation. Obviously, the campus newspaper and campus radio stations provide some access for publicity of such programs. Posters, handouts, and related bulletin board materials are also useful for publicizing the preview session. Finally, and perhaps the best way to get the greatest exposure for preview sessions, is to have the university publish the preview schedule in the regular class schedule booklet used for pre-registration. When students determine what classes they were going to take, they could simply turn to the section on preview and determine the time and place to preview the courses that interested them.

While the preview program offers the obvious advantages of exposure to class offerings, it also offers a chance to improve student academic advising. Without a preview program students occasionally seek the advice of their adviser with regard to courses that they are planning to take. These faculty advisers probably do not know what is being offered by their colleagues in other disciplines throughout the university. With preview, the student can become his own best adviser for he would then know what course content is going to be offered in the courses in which he is interested.

Having operated with this program for two semesters, several problems arise. First, it is important that faculty are made aware of the value of such a program as it is not always possible to secure faculty cooperation. Needless to say, such a program requires faculty to give up free time to prepare and give the preview sessions. It also forces faculty to decide the course content for their classes at least a semester or a quarter in advance of the actual presentation of the class. (Perhaps this is a serendipity of the preview program.) The initial success of a preview program could encourage faculty to engage in the program in ensuing semesters.

A second problem with the preview progam is the lack of publicity. With all the publicity described above, our initial attempt in providing students with the preview can only be described as a limited success. We did not have the funds to purchase large ads in the student newspaper to fully explain the preview program. Students misinterpreted the preview sessions as short courses for credit concurrent with their regular semester classes. They thought that they could take the preview class and receive actual semester hours credit for it. It is important, therefore, to get wide publicity in order to make students aware of the new option open to them.

A third problem facing our preview program was the lack of available rooms at peak hours. The university books most of its rooms during the highly desirable hours between 10:00 A.M. and 3:00 P.M. during the day. Without rooms at the peak hours, the preview program is forced to offer a schedule of classes at 8:00 A.M. or at 5:00 P.M. (neither of which have been highly attractive for student attendance in regular classes).

In conclusion, it is too soon to provide a final evaluation of our preview program based on increases in enrollments or questionnaire data from students who have engaged in the preview option. However, from our initial two attempts in offering preview courses, student and faculty response from those who did participate was affirmative and caused us to consider the program as a permanent part of our department's curriculum offerings.

As we seek ways to expose our students to our specific disciplines and at the same time respond to pressures from administrators and external forces, the preview course program offers one opportunity to demonstrate that departments are indeed interested in their students and in the courses that they select.